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AUTHOR Fredrickson, John H.
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ABSTRACT

While millions of dollars have been spent to build open space schools, relatively few have been allocated to teacher education, inservice training, and followup supervision. If a school district has a genuine commitment to an educational format that stresses student initiative and responsibility, backed by funds for staff development, teachers must be given encouragement. They need support from administrators, board members and parents; aid in developing both a philosophy and rationale for their approach; workshops where they can learn about teaching materials and develop curriculum ideas; and time to share these things with fellow teachers. (Author/MLF)

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OPEN SPACE - SECONDARY STYLE

By

DR. JOHN H. FREDRICKSON
School Facilities Consultant
Middleton, Wisconsin

Open space schools have been springing up at an astonishing pace during the past decade in America. Astonishing not because there is something wrong with the open concept, but because of the reasons they have been built and the questionable planning that has gone into many of them. Here are some reasons offered for going to open space:

1. "Open education" is the "in" thing today.
2. They look nice. Their "openness" and color and the scene they afford of many groups of students at once are very impressive.
3. Open architecture gives an appearance of innovation and excitement.

Obviously, none of these reasons justifies going to open space schools. But even if they did, the real problem is teaching in such schools. Many teachers just do not want to teach in the open concept environment, and even if they would like to try, most don't know how. While millions of dollars have been spent to build open space schools, relatively few have been allocated to teacher education, in-service training and follow-up supervision.

Open Space Concept

The open space concept offers the kind of flexibility necessary to sustain the massive re-structuring of education which is fast-approaching. The absence of load-bearing interior walls is its major architectural feature. The roof is supported by the exterior walls and the inner space is virtually open.

This "openness" can and often is modified by the use of various kinds of operable and portable walls, or accordion partitions and vision screens. (Operable walls are sound-rated panels anchored to an outside wall or column and both open and close by riding on tracks

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mounted in the ceiling and/or floor. Portable walls are also sound-rated panels which are easily relocatable anywhere in a building. Vision screens and accordion partitions are light weight units used as sight dividers.) Open space structures are extremely flexible, lending themselves to unlimited numbers of teaching station sizes and shapes.

Admittedly, not everyone connected with open space schools now in operation would agree with their desirability. Many teachers and administrators have had shattering experiences attempting to function in this new environment. The real problem is the lack of training. After all, a school building is merely an enclosure for the instructional program and practices, and architectural form supposedly follows educational function.

So not all open space schools have been successes; in fact, some have even been disasters. These checkered experiences are clear evidence of the need for a better understanding of the open space concept and the elements required for effective application. Teachers and administrators must begin to consider open space in terms of the potential manipulation of many subspaces, a manipulation dictated by innovative learning activities. Flexible design cannot alone guarantee flexible use.

Open space, therefore, must be considered negotiable. Its elastic qualities invite choice and variety, including degrees of enclosure. And negotiable spatial variations are the hallmark of the open space concept. More specifically, a teacher's natural desire for teaching privacy - visual and auditory - need not be sacrificed in the open concept. By employing strategically placed wall assemblies and vision screens, such teaching intimacy can easily be achieved without thwarting the positive factors of the open space concept.

Open Space High School

While most open concept schools in America are at the elementary level, some secondary schools have been built and are functioning successfully. One such school is located in Michigan.

The 1973-1974 school year marked the beginning of the open concept at the secondary level with a new open space high school in Lawton. The first truly "open space" secondary school in Michigan, the open area has 14 teaching stations which accommodate business education, English, home economics, foreign languages, mathematics, science and social studies. Because there are no interior walls, each station is directly adjacent to the media center which is situated in the geographic center of the complex. Visual and acoustical separation between each teaching area is very limited. And space can be altered almost instantly. Everything moves - furniture and equipment shaping and re-shaping the learning territory which can readily adapt to virtually any configuration.

At Lawton, "open space" has become a tremendous tool or environment which is manipulated by an innovative, flexible staff to bring about a more relaxed, informal and individualized learning atmosphere. Indeed, the key to making open space live up to its potential is the teacher.

The School Board

Credit, of course, must be given to the Lawton Board of Education. The members are to be congratulated for their intensive study of the educational goals and objectives of the community, their investigation of alternative school designs, their desire to be cognizant of both current and future trends in education, and especially for their desire to create a building which would provide an atmosphere that would make learning a pleasant, relaxed and motivating experience.

During the planning stages, the Lawton Board established the following goals:

1. To create a new and stimulating atmosphere which would encourage a more informal relationship between student and teacher.
2. To place major emphasis on the learner through individualization of instruction.
3. To develop an open climate free from the constraints common to so many existing school facilities.
4. To build a more spacious, more adaptable, less restrictive and less rigid learning environment flexible enough to meet any future needs.
5. To minimize the wasted space of corridors and fixed classroom sizes.

Open Space Management

While the frequency of misconduct has not changed, the nature of it has. The two most frequent complaints are behavior which interferes with the study of others and students leaving a teaching area (and not returning) without the permission of the instructor. Open space does create a condition which lends itself to these types of discipline problems. For the student who chooses not to study, there is indeed more opportunity to disturb those around him or her. And the lack of walls makes it possible for students to move out of the teaching areas without the immediate knowledge of the teacher in charge.

More important than these relatively minor discipline problems, however, is the improvement in the overall attitude of the students. They are more cheerful, courteous and respectful. It would appear that they are learning more and enjoying doing it. One might suppose that in an atmosphere where informality and individual work is stressed, students would produce less. Happily, this has not been the case. It is felt that because the open space environment promotes a more mature and realistic teacher-student relationship, the students have willingly responded to the opportunity.

Open Space Teaching

As stated earlier, the key to making open space function effectively is the teacher. No matter what the program or surroundings may be, the ultimate responsibility for success rests with the teaching staff. The successful open space teacher must be prepared to break the bonds of traditionalism. He or she must work to make certain that learning is student-centered rather than teacher-centered. Open space teachers must be ready to lose their educational inhibitions and their teaching insecurities.

Admittedly, it is not always easy for teachers to change their approach to instruction. Since their own education was usually delivered in the lecture mode, teachers tend to pattern their teaching styles after previous high school and college experiences. Therefore, if a teaching staff is to move successfully into open space education, in-service training must be provided continuously. Without proper in-service programs, districts can expect to hear a clamor for walls and doors from teaching personnel.

In open space schools, students are encouraged to work independently or in small groups. The teacher, consequently, is expected to be less an expounder of facts and more a resource person and director of activities. And it takes an exceptional teacher to do this effectively. Some will do an excellent job immediately, many will have some difficulty because they are limited in their ability to create alternative approaches to learning without assistance.

Open space teachers, therefore, have to work harder than those in traditional schools, if they expect to fulfill their teaching obligations. Naturally it is easier to lecture to 30 students for 45 minutes and to utilize printed tests and dittoed materials so that every pupil is treated exactly as his or her neighbor. Successful open space

teaching requires that each student be looked upon as an individual, tutored and finally evaluated as an individual. Teachers must prepare alternative assignments for the more gifted students while they work with those in need of additional help. Tests must be designed according to the performance of the individual and intensive follow-up of failures must take place.

Conclusions

The purpose of secondary open space schools is not only academic but social and psychological as well. And the idea is for each open space school to develop its own personality and atmosphere in order to strengthen social relationships, encourage a sense of identity and the kind of teacher-student loyalty that helps students to achieve in school.

If a school district does not have a genuine commitment to an educational format that stresses student initiative and responsibility, backed by funds for staff development, it should avoid the secondary open space concept. If commitment does exist, teachers must be given real encouragement. They need support from administrators, board members and parents; aid in developing both a philosophy and rationale for their approach; workshops where they can learn about teaching materials and develop curriculum ideas; and time to share these things with fellow teachers. If these conditions are met, open space - secondary style can and will succeed.

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